

Part two of a conversation with film historian, scholar James Naremore: Max Ophuls's classic *Letter From an Unknown Woman* (1948)

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Yesterday we posted the first part of a conversation with James Naremore, Chancellors' Professor Emeritus of Communication and Culture, English and Comparative Literature at Indiana University and one of the most distinguished contemporary commentators on cinema.

The first portion of the interview focused on the work of African American filmmaker Charles Burnett, director of *Killer of Sheep* (1978), *My Brother's Wedding* (1983), *To Sleep with Anger* (1990), *The Glass Shield* (1994), *Nightjohn* (1996), *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property* (2003) and *Warming by the Devil's Fire* (an episode in the mini-series, *The Blues*, 2003), among other films. Professor Naremore authored a book about Burnett's work, *Charles Burnett: A Cinema of Symbolic Knowledge* (University of California Press, 2017).

The second part of the conversation concentrated on *Letter From an Unknown Woman* (1948), a film directed by German-born Max Ophuls while he was in exile in the US in the 1940s. Naremore has written a study of the film, recently published by BFI Film Classics. The film, produced by John Houseman and with a script by Howard Koch (a future blacklist victim), is based on a 1922 novella by Austrian author Stefan Zweig (1881-1942).

The film takes the form of a letter from a woman, Lisa Berndle (Joan Fontaine), to a man, celebrated pianist Stefan Brand (Louis Jourdan), with whom she has been obsessed since adolescence. He reads it during the course of one night.

In flashbacks, in turn-of-the-century Vienna, we see Lisa—in a memorable sequence—as a young girl fascinated with Brand's musical instruments and *objets d'art* as he moves into an apartment in the building where Lisa lives with her widowed mother (Mady Christians).

Years later, after having been obliged to move away with her mother when the latter remarries, she returns to Vienna and waits outside Stefan's building each night until he notices her. He is drawn to her, although he does not recognize her. His mute servant John (Art Smith), however, does. Brand and Lisa begin a romance that brings her the happiest days of her life. Soon, however, Stefan leaves for a concert in Milan, promising to be in touch when he returns. He never contacts her. She gives birth to a child.

A decade later, now married to a high-ranking military officer, Lisa encounters Stefan, who has more or less given up playing the piano and seems frayed and debauched, at the opera. Against her husband's wishes, she visits Stefan at his apartment. He still does not remember her, and she rushes out. Later, fatally ill from typhus (which has killed their son), Lisa writes Brand from her deathbed, pouring out her heart. She dies. Brand makes ready for a duel with her outraged husband, which the pianist is unlikely to survive.

Max Ophuls was one of the great filmmakers of the '30s, '40s and

'50s. Born Maximilian Oppenheimer in Saarbrücken, Germany, the son of a wealthy Jewish textile manufacturer, Ophuls (who changed his name not to embarrass his family) entered the theater in the aftermath of World War I. He became a theater director in Dortmund in 1924 and creative director of the Burgtheater in Vienna in 1926. Ophuls directed hundreds of plays before turning to filmmaking in the late '20s. In 1933, he directed *Liebelei*, an antimilitaristic work based on a play by Arthur Schnitzler, and in 1934, *Everybody's Woman* in Italy.

After Hitler's coming to power, Ophuls went into exile, first to France (where he made several films in the late 1930s), and then, after traveling through Switzerland, Italy and Portugal, the US, in 1941. He had difficulty finding filmmaking opportunities, until a friend, director Preston Sturges, intervened. Ophuls directed *The Exile* (1947) with Douglas Fairbanks Jr., a minor work, and then three remarkable films, *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, *Caught* (1949) and *The Reckless Moment* (1949), the latter two with James Mason. (*Caught* centers on a deranged, monomaniacal multimillionaire, apparently inspired by mogul Howard Hughes.)

In the 1950s Ophuls returned to France, directing several more brilliant works—*La Ronde* (1950), *Le Plaisir* (1952), *The Earrings of Madame de...* (1953) and *Lola Montès* (1955).

He is renowned for his restless, mobile camera. In his study of *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, Naremore writes that "Ophuls's films tend to have circular narratives in which events repeat or return with ironic variation. The pattern is echoed in his treatment of space and the movement of figures. Characters move around rooms as they talk, dance in circles and ascend or descend winding staircases, creating a feeling of wheels within wheels."

The director was not devoted to style for style's sake. As Naremore explains in our discussion below, "style is related to meaning in all his work." As an active, "oppositional" element, mobility is associated, among other things, with Ophuls's attitude toward Viennese (and German) society, its restrictedness, stratification and stagnation, its suffocating character. As the WSWs commented in 2000, Ophuls's character, often "wealthy and privileged ... are trapped in societies that stifle the human spirit and make it impossible to attain true love and fulfillment."

Ophuls's films, including *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, are strongly recommended.

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David Walsh: We can now turn to Max Ophuls. Do you want to explain why he is an important filmmaker to you?

James Naremore: I've always loved his films. The context here is that I just wrote a book about *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, and I've

always loved that work in particular. I'm retired from teaching now, but I used to teach it, I used to show it occasionally to students. At one point, I made a bad joke: If you don't like this film, we can't be good friends.

I would show the Ophuls film, and I would ask afterward: Do you think the woman in the film is a hero or a fool? And that always led to interesting class discussions. I would say the answer is that she's both. That's one of the aspects of the film that makes it so intriguing.

It's what used to be called a "woman's melodrama," but it's unique in that category for various reasons. I'm always captivated by Ophuls's style, what he does with a camera. I think he's one of the great stylists in the history of the movies.

DW: But as I'm sure you would go on to say, that style is not simply style, it implies or contains an attitude toward life and the world.

JN: Yes, the mistake a great many people make about Ophuls, because his films deal with a wealthy, almost baroque decorated world, is to charge him with triviality. What makes him so fascinating is that he's the opposite of a trivial artist. The style is related to meaning in all his work.

In a way, he is inimitable. Perhaps because he is often dealing with memories and feelings about a particular period and place. It's hard to imagine filmmakers today working in the same way.

DW: There's also the tragic fact that the world Ophuls came from and represented was annihilated.

JN: He also had real struggles getting to work in Hollywood. It took him a number of years, whereas other émigrés had easier access. His career in America was a relatively brief one. He directed *The Exile*, *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, *Caught* and *The Reckless Moment* in the US.

DW: I do agree with your comment that the film of *Letter From an Unknown Woman* is superior to the original story by Stefan Zweig. Her masochism in the book is a bit grating. Although she keeps asserting, as she tells this unhappy story, 'I'm not complaining,' but her letter of course is one prolonged complaint.

JN: What's fascinating about the movie is that although we're on her side the entire time, she is also somewhat irritating, obsessive.

DW: Yes, well, the film makes clear that the problem is not *her*, but the drab, lower middle class life she's stuck with, which impels her to pursue this fantasy. It doesn't criticize her; it criticizes the conditions that make her fantasy life necessary.

Was there ever a film quite like this? Nearly all of it obsessively takes place in the past, the present is hardly present at all, and even then, the letter-writer herself begins by suggesting that she may well be dead by the time Brand reads her letter. And he is more or less condemned to die, probably certain to die, at the end. Nearly everyone we see (because the events take place in the past) has either gotten old, died or is on the verge of dying.

Yet somehow, this is not an especially or overwhelmingly gloomy or pessimistic film. I think you would agree with that, but I will ask.

JN: You don't come out smiling and laughing, but it's not a bleak film. It's a strangely exhilarating one. I think that has something to do with the intelligence with which it was made.

DW: The point critic Robin Wood makes, that "life is movement" in Ophuls, which echoes a line from his *Lola Montes*, seems reasonable to me.

JN: A cinematographer who worked with Ophuls said he could not talk without walking. His characters are moving all the time, along with his camera.

DW: And one has to give Howard Koch's screenplay credit as well. As opposed to the short story, obviously, which is entirely in letter form, the film represents other human beings, the flower seller, the waiters, the coachman, the audience at the opera, the all-women's orchestra, etc. Those figures have importance in the film.

JN: Absolutely they do. In fact, the film gives you the whole structure of turn-of-the-century Vienna, from top to bottom, including the middle, and

it's all relevant.

The one thing the film represses is Jewishness. It never directly represents that, although a great many of the people involved in the making of the film were Jewish. That was the Hollywood situation. They had to restrict themselves.

DW: Nonetheless, how could you not think about that, the fate of Austria's and Europe's Jews, watching this film, and how could Ophuls not think about it making this film?

Could you perhaps describe the first scene in the film, which takes place in the stairway of the apartment building? The whole dramatic and social situation is somehow summed up or foreshadowed in that scene.

JN: Joan Fontaine plays the central character, Lisa Berndle. She's writing a letter to this man she's loved all her life, Stefan Brand, played by Louis Jourdan.

In a flashback, as a girl, Lisa gains her first knowledge of Brand. He moves into the apartment building where she and her mother live. He's a musician. What she sees being unloaded and brought up to his apartment is nothing like anything she's ever seen before. She's this ragamuffin, teenage girl, kind of untidy, wandering around the street. The van has gorgeous musical instruments, a lyre, a piano, art objects. She's fascinated. Her petty-bourgeois single mother calls her from upstairs to come in. Lisa's hesitant to move away.

Then, typically, Ophuls makes this all one shot, with the camera on a crane: Lisa passes through the entrance way of the building, where the concierge and the workmen are grumbling. The workmen, hoisting the piano, are saying, I wish he was a piccolo player. She sees all that. She goes up a long stairway, past the workmen, past the musical instruments, and when she gets to the top, there is a man-servant John, who works for the new tenant, and he is directing the workmen. He has a big pile of books. He's making notes, and she realizes he can't speak—he's mute. He has to write down instructions. All of this is done in one shot. It's not only a beautiful shot, but it places her in relation to a whole number of things, including the different social classes and the art work.

There is so little offered to people, to women especially, in her world. We understand why she's drawn to this artistic, intellectual life.

DW: For anyone to say that this film is socially indifferent is absurd. Ophuls shows us the lower middle class drabness and near-poverty or economic insecurity (conditions that lead women in many cases to bad marriages or prostitution), the divide between an elaborate and refined high culture—reserved for a wealthy few—and everyday life and kitsch for everybody else. There's this *extreme* stratification, as you point out in your book.

JN: For women in Vienna there were only two ways to rise out of your social class: to marry someone from a more elevated class or to become an elite prostitute or "kept woman" of someone rich. In the Zweig story, the woman becomes one of those elite prostitutes; in the movie, she marries a military officer of high rank.

As for the man Lisa loves all the time, Brand-Jourdan, he doesn't really belong to any definite social group. Or, he belongs to a higher social class, but it's kind of artistic "dandyism" or aestheticism, a world of art, which is a more pleasing one for Lisa than any other alternative.

DW: What do you make of him? At the end, he sees himself as something of a failure, because he hasn't got the talent, or because he was too easy on himself?

JN: It's all of those things. He hardly has a moment in the film when he isn't self-critical or self-denigrating, albeit sometimes in a modestly charming way. When he first meets her, he says, "I've had things too easy." He's a handsome piano virtuoso, modeled on Franz Liszt, but not as talented. Liszt's music plays a key role in the film. Brand's a fine pianist, but one gets the sense that he's a performer who gets by with glamour as much as with his piano skills. He's aware of that. He eventually drops out of playing altogether and simply carries out a series

of seductions. A gloomy Don Juan.

DW: Is that certain lack of depth, or self-involvement, connected to the fact that he can never recognize her?

JN: Yes. Well, he vaguely remembers her.

DW: I do think the camera movement is the revolt of the flexible, the sinuous, the “feminine,” against the stiffness of the Austrian bureaucracy, officialdom, the military.

JN: This is a constant theme in Ophuls. Most of his films are centered on women. Most of them are about romantic failure. I cite W.H. Auden in my book. He says there are two pernicious myths in Western culture. First, the Tristan and Isolde story, which is about a romance that transcends every other person in the world—only you and this other person exist. Its opposite is the Don Juan myth, about a serial seducer.

Auden suggests that both of these myths have been popularized in various ways, and that what the popularizers don’t understand is that people who pursue these myths in real life are desperately unhappy. In *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, you have these two myths, side by side. You get the romantic idealist and the serial seducer, and both are miserably unhappy.

DW: Which films by Ophuls would you recommend the most to those who don’t know his work?

JN: All of them. I would say, two of the Hollywood films, *Caught* and *The Reckless Moment*, are extremely good. *Caught* is a thinly veiled commentary on Howard Hughes.

Later in his career, he returned to Europe, to France, *The Earrings of Madame de ...*, *La Ronde*, *Le Plaisir* also. There are people who are huge fans of *Lola Montes*, his last film, and it’s certainly worth seeing. I’ve not always been as enamored of it as some people are, but once you come to know Ophuls, it could be seen as his ultimate statement.

Concluded



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